

“Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness”
June 12, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

New Testament Lesson

Matthew 25: 14-26

[Bob]: For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying,

[Kessey]: **“Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.”**

[Bob]: His master said to him,

[Dave]: **“Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”**

[Bob]: And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying,

[Merry]: **“Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.”**

[Bob]: His master said to him,

[Dave]: **“Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”**

[Bob]: Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying,

[Zakarian]: **“Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”**

[Bob]: But his master replied,

[Dave]: **“You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?”**

Parables are one of the key reasons Jesus was killed.

As someone quipped, “You don’t kill a man for telling cute stories.”

You do crucify him for telling parables. Parables provoke. Meddlesome. They step on your toes and squish them. They are designed to make your soul uncomfortable.

They dice your presumptions and slice your convictions. Dice and slice.

So now, what’s the best way to dig in and excavate the meaning of a parable?

Listen to it and then ask probing questions. Such as: which of the three slaves are you?

Framing questions help you answer that one.

Let’s frame it.

First off, always start by asking to whom Jesus is telling the parable. That’ll give you a pretty strong hint about its punch. ***So, to whom is this parable directed?***

We flip back to the beginning of Chapter 24 to find our answer. This parable – coupled with two other ones -- is how Jesus answers his disciples when they ask what will be signs of the end of the age and the beginning of the new age of Christ? Never expect Jesus to give a straight answer when he can tell a parable and make you decide.

How many characters are involved in the story?

Four: one master and three slaves. He’s definitely the boss. He’s definitely big time rich.

Where is the master going?

All we are told is that he’s going on a journey. Which tells us that he’s entrusting all his property to his staff. Not as if he can telephone in and check on things. No video-conferencing. What he owns is in their hands and out of his control.

How long was he away?

We’re told, “...a long time.”

How come he gives them talents before he leaves?

Don't really know. One thing for sure: it is not their money. So, is it a test to see what they can do? While I was away, did you increase my wealth?

Does he want them to keep busy? It does make a little sense to give them a reason, an incentive, to be diligent and attentive, them knowing that the master will return one day.

This makes sense: this is guaranteed -- he will come back and expect an accounting of themselves. There will be a day of reckoning. Matter of fact, forget silly or manipulative predictions of the end of the world on such and such a date. Doesn't it make better sense that every day is a day of reckoning of that with which we have been entrusted? It doesn't belong to us. What does? Who does? It is something we have been loaned, given to us to use and grow, to increase.

By the way, how much money? Well, a talent isn't money. It's a weight. They figure 75 lbs. **[Pause: invite kid to come up and try to lift]** 75 lbs of coins. 75 lbs of drachmas would be about 6,000 drachmas -- what it would take a laborer to earn in 20 years. In today's reckoning, figure each talent is worth \$800,000.

Do the two get to keep the profit the two made?

Doubt they expected to. They're slaves. Servants. Their privilege is to serve; but, when their master benefits, they benefit. Yet, oddly enough, later on, when the wicked servant is punished, he has to give up his talent to the one who had ten. So I'm supposing they not only got to keep the profit but the original stake as well. What an astounding surprise!

How come the three are given different amounts?

As it is said, "each according to their ability." All persons may be equal in the eyes of God, but since when are all persons equal in ability or character? Having equal rights isn't the same as saying all men are equal. They aren't. We aren't. Some are more capable than others, more trustworthy, exhibiting different skills. Some are smarter than others. Some brave, some cowards. Some humble, some braggarts. Some are born leaders. Some are born followers.

This Master is no fool; he already has sized up their potential. He already is well aware of their mettle, the level of their faithfulness.

Our scars and our failures have taught us that it really isn't right belief that our master and friend Jesus wants. It isn't right doctrine or even being right. For the gospel is not even a good idea -- it is the reality of relationship, a matter making the most of this flesh and blood, of these living gifts entrusted to us each.

How entrusted? By our ears. Because we hear his Word. It is how all relationships exist -- by the words by which we know each other.

Faithfulness. Which in the Greek means a "firm conviction based upon something you have heard."

Your conviction comes because you have been persuaded to trust it. Which gets closer to the Hebrew understanding of faithfulness, as Hebrew lacks a noun for the word faith.

Faith in Hebrew always is a verb. Faith never is an object, never a possession, always an action.

What is the key difference between the first two and the third?

Here we cut to the quick. What does he say? He calls his master a harsh man. He accuses him of profiting off others. He tries to excuse himself for being lazy and afraid. He tries to get himself off the hook, trying to convince the master that it was a smart thing to keep what he was given exactly the same as it was given him – no change, no improvement, no nothing. Here's a useful reminder for all who want to keep the status quo.

But, of course, what was this slave's chief concern?

He was more interested in saving his own skin. It is not the slaves who turned a profit who were self-seeking; it is this miserable lout. Worse, he blames the master for his actions (or should we say, his inaction?). The other two are trustworthy, faithful, and view the master in the same light. This fellow views the master as an unjustly harsh man. Our images of God govern our actions.

This slave, who buries the money, simply is covering his backside rather than be willing to run the risk.

Please also, don't confuse this as promoting a theology of affluence. That perversion of Christianity is today very popular on a lot Christian TV stations where they sell you the idea that if you are truly faithful you also will prosper materially. And we're talking stocks, bonds, money in the bank, BMW's in the garage. Very foolish to imagine those as valuable.

Jesus' parable is a wee bit more than a convenient excuse for materialism. Yes, Jesus wants you rich. Rich in things of the Spirit. Rich in love, rich in joy, rich in peace, rich in patience, rich in kindness, rich in goodness, rich in faithfulness, rich in gentleness, rich in self-control.

This last fellow was given a chance, he was given the great gift of the master's trust, and he failed.

Some Bible characters are positive examples to us. This last guy is an anti-example.

Which of the three are you?